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ABSTRACT

This paper describes accounts of two kindergarten-aged children learning English as a second language (ESL) to demonstrate that exposure is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for acquiring a second language. The 10-month histories of "L," a quick and highly successful learner, and "M," a less successful, much slower learner, illustrate how proficiency in the native language, the school environment, and personality factors interact in the acquisition of a second language by young children. These three determining factors are discussed in detail. Extensive within-subject and cross-subject comparisons of language comprehension, accuracy, and fluency are made with data obtained from responses to the 21 questions of the Bilingual Syntax Measure, a test sometimes used to assess the English language proficiency of primary school students. It is concluded that the majority of ESL children entering school are neither as proficient at language learning as "L" nor as slow as "M." While the different abilities and different backgrounds ESL students bring to the task of language learning are beyond the teacher's control, teachers can provide a school environment that is supportive, linguistically rich, and that encourages the use of language which serves the functions of basic interpersonal communication. (Author/RH)

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"A TALE OF TWO LEARNERS"

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A Tale of Two Learners

Abstract

The myth that young children are such effective second language learners that they just "pick it up" can lead to dangerous educational practice. This paper presents accounts of two kindergarten-aged children learning English as their second language to demonstrate that the myth is indeed false, that exposure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for acquiring a second language. The 10-month histories of two children, one a highly successful learner, the other far less so, serve to illustrate how proficiency in the native language, the school environment and personality factors interact in the acquisition of a second language by young children.

A Tale of Two Learners

Among some educators and much of the general public, there is a myth about second language learning. Probably there are many, but this one is particularly important because it is so widely believed and because it can lead to potentially damaging practice. The myth is that children are superior second language learners, so superior in fact that language instruction is not necessary since they will "pick it up" on the playground, in the classroom, in the corridors, on the bus, wherever children come together and talk. Presumably, non-English speaking children contract English in much the same way as they contract measles or chicken pox. Those who believe in the "contagion" myth have their evidence. They point to French immersion programs in which children learn French through their math and science lessons, social studies and so on. Because it appears to the uninformed that children in immersion learn French without any special effort, either theirs or their teachers', the myth is perpetuated.

Other believers in the myth will tell you how they spent a year in Germany (or France or Japan) without learning a word of the language, but that five-year-old Johnny spoke German (or French or Japanese) like a native by the time they left. Or they will point to a parent or grandparent who arrived in Canada without knowing any English at all, went to a "regular" school -- there were none of these special ESL classes then -- and today owns a business and speaks English fluently. Bernard Mohan tells one such "success" story, the story of a young man who came to North America at a time when no particular attention was given in the schools to English language instruction. At the age of nine, Salvatore Lucania entered school in New York city and began his education. In Mr. Lucania's own words:

> 'All the other kids in my class was like little babies but they could talk English and I didn't know what the ----they was sayin'. Maybe that's why I fought so hard to get outa school, out into the streets where a lotta people spoke Sicilian-Italian and they knew what I was sayin' and I could understand them. I picked up my English on the streets. That's the one thing I regret in my life more than anythin' else, that my grammar is lousy and I don't have too many good words....' (Gough et al. 1974;13 quoted in Mohan 1981).

Mohan goes on to point out that, except for a short time when a dispute over income tax led the U.S. government to give him free accommodation, Mr. Lucania was no burden on the taxpayer, and he took full advantage of his educational opportunities, learning everything that the urban streets had to teach him:

> After some independent study spent extorting money from young school kids for protection, he moved to group work - taking over unions by strong-arm methods. Having established his qualifications, he graduated to the mafia and rose to the top, becoming known to the world as Lucky Luciano. (Mohan 1981;11)

The point made by Mohan's story is obviously not that withholding language instruction will induce criminal behaviour; we all know of many legitimate success stories. Nor is it the falsity of the myth, for it is not entirely false; many children are excellent language learners. The point is the danger in the implication that all children are equally good learners and will somehow acquire a second language without special programs or assistance. This implication ignores the plethora of variables which influence second language acquisition, variables which we are only beginning to understand, but which fall into the categories of environment, cognition, personality and age among others.

Ignoring these variables and the complex interactions among them and adopting a laissez faire attitude to child second language acquisition (SLA) can have disastrous consequences, for the truth of the matter is that even with specialized instruction in school, some children experience a great deal of difficulty acquiring English as their second language.

In this paper, I will illustrate the danger of the myth by demonstrating that not all young children are efficient, successful second language learners, that exposure is necessary but hardly sufficient to assure success - in other words, that exposure does not produce "an earthly language paradise where fluency is earned without toil and pain" (Mohan 1982;11). To dispel the myth, I have chosen, as the title indicates, to tell two stories. One is the story of a 4½ year old girl who was a remarkably successful language learner; the other is the story of a boy of about the same age who was less so.

I met both these children several years ago when I undertook a longitudinal study of second language acquisition. The fifteen children who participated in the study were all beginners at the start of the school year. The children came from two mainstream kindergarten classes, i.e., there were both native and non-native speakers of English in the classes, and there was no formal language instruction. The time the ESL children spent in the kindergartens was supplemented by an additional 45 minutes with an ESL teacher

who played language games with them and engaged them in dialogues and other activities intended to foster language development. The two children whose language development I have chosen to describe were chosen not because they were unique in their levels of achievement, but precisely because they were not. L, the more successful of the two learners acquired English as her second language under nearly optimal circumstances while M, the less successful learner, attained a more modest level of proficiency under conditions which were far from ideal. These two children, as far apart as they were in accomplishment, were well within the bounds of normal SLA, representing a wide range but probably not either extreme of the normal range of success.

M was 4;5 when I met him in September. The first time I saw him, he was sitting on the floor in a circle of children listening to the teacher read "The Three Bears." He seemed to be fascinated, either with the story or with his teacher, watching her intently and laughing when the other children laughed but otherwise remaining silent. Later that same morning, I called him to sit with me at a small table in the back of the room, motioning with my hand to assure that he understood. He sat obediently and followed my eyes with his as we talked - or rather, as I talked. The only time M responded was when I asked his name. I even had difficulty getting him to repeat the names of various objects in the room until I demonstrated with another child what I wanted

him to do. His repetitions were mostly single syllables, highly nasalized and similar to the point that 'dog' and 'clock' were produced nearly identically as nya with heavy nasalization and 'bird' and 'book' were both muh, again heavily nasalized. In that first session, these four words and perhaps three or four more were all I was able to elicit and these only in imitation.

After class, hoping to learn something about M's background, I talked with his teacher. She knew little about him, however, since the ESL consultant for the school had not yet made a home visit. The teacher did tell me that M was never a problem in class, had not spoken except to say his name when asked, and she believed, but was not certain, that his family spoke Italian at home. At that point, neither the teacher nor I was concerned about M's silence; a silent period, sometimes lasting a few months, is not uncommon in young second language learners.

Three weeks later when I next visited the kindergarten, I could tell by M's expression that he remembered me and this time he came immediately to the back of the room when I called him. Again he watched me intently while we talked, only this time M seemed to understand more of what was said to him. He even responded correctly when asked to name pictures of a house, a bear, and a bed from what had become his favorite story book. His only other utterance was "I don't know." In all his words, his pronunciation remained distorted, and his teacher had still learned nothing about

his native language or home background which would help me to understand what was beginning to seem like delayed language development.

Finally, when I visited the class in mid-November, I learned something about M's background. The ESL consultant had visited the child's home but had learned only that the native language was Italian and that M's parents spoke only a few words of English. The teacher, however, had met M's older sister, a young woman of 20, fluent in English but who reported that she had found school very difficult and had dropped out after grade ten. Fifteen years older than M, she was his only sibling and had lived away from home since M was approximately 2½. Even before that she had had little contact with her brother although she did recall sometimes reading to him and that he enjoyed hearing the stories. When the teacher asked whether she had read to him in Italian or in English, she replied that she had only spoken and read English to him. Their parents, having attributed their daughter's problems in school to her language (Italian instead of English), were determined that M speak only English. Unfortunately, they spoke almost no English themselves, and until he went to kindergarten the child's only live contact with English was with his sister and that only occasional. According to the sister, M understood Italian and spoke a few words, but his parents never encouraged

conversation in Italian and it was her belief that his facility in that language was minimal. The parents, however, keen for M to acquire English, had encouraged him to watch television and provided him with records of children's songs, again in English. This last point had interested the kindergarten teacher because she had observed that M seemed to know the words to certain songs and sometimes joined in with the other children when they sang them.

As I continued to observe M's language development throughout the school year, there were many times when I thought that he was making no progress at all. Although he was always attentive in class, he rarely spoke except in private conversation with his teacher or with me. Compared with the other ESL children in the kindergarten, M had limited vocabulary, and his sentences tended to be short and filled with errors which the other children had either not made or had stopped making. His kindergarten teacher shared my concern over M's lack of progress and doubted, in June, that he would be ready to go into grade one by September. In oral language development he lagged well behind most of his classmates, and it seemed unlikely that he would be ready to learn to read and write in the fall, particularly if he had little opportunity to speak English during the summer months.

Late in June, however, I finally found the time to read and analyze the transcripts of my sessions with M, and in doing so could see that I had underestimated his progress.

M's language development, while slow in comparison to that of the other children, when considered on its own was clearly moving ahead. His pronunciation of many words was still distorted, but he was far more intelligible than he had been earlier in the year. More importantly, there were clear indicators of increasing comprehension and growth in syntax. His progress was most easily seen in the transcripts of his to answers to questions from the Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) (Burt et al. 1975), a test sometimes used to assess English language proficiency in K-3 children. Selections from those transcripts are reproduced in Table one.

Insert Table one about here

Growth in a second language can be measured in three broad categories - comprehension, accuracy, and fluency. Although the language sample provided by the answers to 21 questions was small, it was sufficient to show development in all three areas.

Comprehension. In November, M failed to respond to five questions and gave an unintelligible answer or "Cause" to four others. Whether his failure to respond and his truncated answers occurred because he did not understand the question or because he did not know how to answer cannot be determined with certainty. Nevertheless, there is other

evidence that his listening comprehension improved between November when he gave his first response to the BSM questions (he had not responded at all in three attempts in the previous two months) and June. His response in January to the question, "What is the mommy bird going to do with the worm?" showed that he had not understood the question, but in March and again in June his responses were appropriate. A similar pattern appears with Question 18, "Why is the dog looking at the king?". The November response does not answer the question asked and not until March is it clear that M has correctly understood the question. On the other hand, the answers to Question 20, "What would have happened to the food if the dog hadn't eaten it?" indicate that he probably did not understand what was being asked even by June.

Perhaps the most interesting observation about M's oral comprehension ability came from his responses to Question 10. In the previous question he had been asked what the man in the picture was doing to the floor (he is shown mopping it). After November, his responses indicated that he had understood that question. In November and January he did not answer Question 10, "Why?" saying only "Cause." This behaviour might be interpreted as resulting from limits on syntactic ability since it is unlikely that he had not understood the question. The March response, however, suggested that M had understood the referent of "that" in Question 10 to be his own response "Washing" and not "washing the floor." The man, in other words and according to M's answer, was washing

himself "because him stink." This type of error is an association error in which the child has associated washing with smelling bad without regard to the particular details of the discourse task at hand. This type of error is not unknown, particularly in a test situation, and is not proof-positive that comprehension is lacking. It is possible that M processed the question correctly but, lacking the vocabulary to give the right answer, came up with another one rather than let the question go unanswered. Nevertheless, the total pattern of responses given in November, January, March and June make clear that he understood more in June than he had in November although no precise measurement of change is possible. Even though it is difficult to segregate certain comprehension errors from production errors, it is certain that no language development would have taken place over the seven month period without growth in comprehension since a child's ability to speak a second language nearly always lags behind his understanding of it.

Accuracy. Accuracy can be thought of in two senses - semantic accuracy, or producing notionally and functionally correct utterances, and grammatical accuracy, or producing utterances correct in form. The first sense cannot be readily separated from comprehension, as noted above. In this case, however, administering the BSM requires the person giving the test to assure that the child has the vocabulary to answer the questions since the procedure is intended to measure the acquisition of certain syntactic forms and not particular

lexical items. Moreover, the pictures are very straightforward, making most questions unambiquous. The picture accompanying Question 2, "What is the mommy bird going to do with the worm?", for example, shows a mother bird, worm in beak, hovering over a nest filled with baby birds, their mouths open expectantly. Since it is not likely that the intent of the picture would be misunderstood, it is reasonably safe to assume that the response "Eat it" is not a comprehension error but a production error. It may be the case that the child's intended response was correct but his syntactic capability did not allow him to produce the subject, direct object, and indirect object much less to produce them in the correct order. He did, after all, give the most salient information to the question - that the worm was to be eaten.

Similarly, the answer to Question 11, "Why are their eyes closed?" was well prompted both by the detail of the picture and by a prior task requiring the child to point to the fish with their eyes open and then to the fish with their eyes closed. M's responses in November and January, then, could also be attributed to a limitation either on his syntactic ability or, possibly in this particular case, on vocabulary. M simply might not have known the word "sleeping" which was not provided in this task.

M's responses to Question 5, "And why is he so skinny?" further revealed the confounding of comprehension and accuracy

of production. Before the question was asked, M was asked to "point to the fat man" and then "to the skinny Man." He did not point to either in November, suggesting that he did not understand, but in January he correctly identified both the fat man and the skinny man without hesitation. His answer, "Cause he eat too lots," then, indicated an error other than a comprehension error, probably confusion over the meaning of "too" or "lots." His March answer makes more sense. In other words, was might have meant to M not only that something had happened in the past but that it had ceased to happen; the man did eat or had eaten (otherwise he would not be there) but had stopped eating and had become skinny. This explanation is, of course, speculative, but it is reasonable in light of both his ability to identify the skinny man and the form of his response to the same question two months later.

Fluency. A rough measure of M's development in fluency can be obtained simply by counting and comparing the number of words produced in response to the same set of questions in each month. In November the 21 questions elicited 28 words, or an average of 1.33 words per response. By January, however, the number of words jumped to 52, or an average of 2.48 words per response. The March total was almost identical at 51, but in June the total number of words had risen to 69, or 3.29 words per response. Considering that

for Questions 1, 7, 14, 15, and 17, a one-word response was appropriate, and thus dropping these questions from the tally, the means which more accurately represented M's developing fluency were 1.56, 2.94 and 4.0 for November, January and June respectively. In other words, there was an appreciable increase in the length of utterances given in response to the same questions between November and June. While part of this increase might have been attributed to his increased comprehension, Table One shows that some responses showing early comprehension became longer with time. For example, in answer to Question 13, "What did he do with his shoes?", M's response in November and again in January was "Take them off," a semantically correct though syntactically flawed answer. In June, however, he produced the longer (though arguably less appropriate) form, "Doesn't have no shoes on."

Reading other parts of the transcript I realized that the progress shown in the analysis of M's responses to the 21 BSM questions was evident in his unelicited speech as well. From September until late November, there had been no unelicited utterances, but in December and January a few appeared. These were usually made to other children in play and served an instrumental function, i.e., they served to get toys or craft materials M wanted or needed. It was not until January 30 that he began to make observations or express opinions. Looking at a picture of a boy kneeling

beside his bed, his dog at his side, M said without prompting "I like dog - I like little dogs." A few minutes later when I was attempting to focus his attention on a picture of several children playing with a large ball, he persisted in pursuing the subject of the dog:

Investigator: What are these children doing, M?

M: I need big dog.

I: Do you? Why?

M: 'Cause, mm, I leave my mom.

I: You need the dog when you leave your mom?

M: Yeah. Dog - mm - dog go school.

I: The dog would go with you to school?

M: Yeah.

In this exchange M was obviously trying to find the words to tell me about his desire for a dog and what that dog would do, and although the exchange was short, it provided evidence that M's language was developing not only in the three areas described above but in its repertoire of functions.

The instances of voluntary speech increased between January and the end of the school year, and by June he had begun to comment on various topics, even on the pictures in the BSM:

I: And why's he so skinny?

M: Because he's not eating.

I: Good.

M: I know that. [pointing to the houses in the picture]

I: What is it?

M: Fat house and skinny house. Look at that one [flipping the book to another picture].

I: What's happening?

M: Him eating it.

I; Why?

M: Hungry. Me - I too.

I: You're hungry?

M; Yeah.

I: What would you like to eat?

M: Chicken. No, [pointing to apple] one like that.

I: Apple?

M: Yeah, I like.

Although M's oral language, by all measures greatly improved between September and June, he lagged well behind his classmates. One of these classmates, a girl I shall call L, provides a good example of the "standard" against which M's language development was assessed in the kindergarten. This assessment, though neither formal nor even stated, was inevitable under the circumstances.

L was exactly 4;6 when she entered the same kindergarten class as M at the beginning of September. Although she was a beginner in English, it was obvious from the onset that she knew a few English words which she had picked up the previous year when she had attended a play school for two mornings each week. Most of the children in the playschool had been non-English speakers, but the teacher spoke English, so L had had some exposure to the language. Still, she was assessed by both the kindergarten teacher and the ESL consultant as being a beginner since she seemed not to understand much of what was said to her and because her score on the Bilingual Syntax Measure the first time she took it was 2 (out of a possible 5; M was unable to answer any of the questions in September but by November had reached the 2 level).

L lived with her mother, father, a sister a year younger than she, and a baby brother born in late September of her kindergarten year. Her parents spoke very little English, and the language in which the family communicated at home was Portuguese. They also socialized within the Portuguese community and L's playmates outside school all spoke Portuguese. According to the ESL consultant who visited L's home, L was a very talkative child who was not at all shy and liked to "mother" her younger siblings.

In mid-September I visited the school for the second time. When it was L's turn to join me at the back of the room, she came eagerly and completed the BSM in a very short time. She answered all the questions fluently and correctly if not always accurately. I did not need to score the test to appreciate the progress she had made in two short weeks. Either she was a very fast learner or she had known more English than any of us had realized two weeks earlier. By the end of October, I was convinced that both explanations were probably true. Because she was showing such impressive progress, it seemed highly unlikely that she had learned only a few words during her roughly 100 hours in preschool. It was more likely that she had acquired much more English than her performance two weeks earlier had indicated, but had not used it over the summer and came to the kindergarten a bit "rusty." In two weeks most of the rust had been polished away.

In contrast to my concern over M's slow progress, I was always aware of L's speed. Although it was not necessary to analyze the transcripts to know how well her oral language was developing, her responses to the same 21 questions used to illustrate M's progress provide some specific data on which to judge hers:

Insert Table Two about here

Because L was able to complete the BSM two months earlier than M, her responses in mid-September are also given. As Table Two shows, L's English language ability in September exceeded M's in June on all three measures. I will discuss the probable reasons for her success later, but first some evaluation of her progress will make comparison with M possible.

Comprehension. From the first, L's responses indicated that her comprehension of spoken English was good. She answered all 21 (and all the other) questions of the BSM and, with the possible exception of Question 20, clearly understood what was being asked. This question, a pluperfect conditional, is semantically complex requiring the processing of the agent and object in reverse order, a WH- question form, a contracted negative and the conditional would. Moreover, the accompanying picture can provide no clues to the meaning of the sentence precisely because it is a conditional. In September, L apparently interpreted the question as asking "What would happen to the dog if he didn't eat?", a simplified interpretation given by many children of the same age and at both lower and higher levels of English language ability. Significantly perhaps, this was not the interpretation given by M who interpreted the question, in November, to ask what happened to the food (which the dog or someone must have eaten in order to throw it up) and, in January, he understood the investigator to say that if the dog hadn't eaten the

food, what else could have happened to it. There was no evidence that either child ever correctly understood the question (that the king would have eaten it), but L gives quite a reasonable answer if the emphasis in the question had been on the dog (as it was to her) and not on the food. Her later answers to the same question support this interpretation, and her January answer was particularly revealing. In responding that the dog will "eat the apple" (instead), she demonstrated once again that she focussed on the dog's being deprived of some particular item of food and not on what might have happened to that food if the dog had not eaten it.

L's answer to Question 21 was wrong only in her particular choice of verb; even with the wrong verb, the sense of her response reflected her understanding of the question. The only other question about which there is some doubt is Question 2, "What is the mommy bird going to do with the worm?". In September, L gave the same response as M gave in January, both children apparently assuming that the focus of the question was the fate of the worm. Alternatively, the question was correctly understood, but the children lacked the syntactic ability to answer it correctly. Plausible with M, this explanation will not suffice for L whose syntactic ability even in mid-September was impressive.

Accuracy. Almost from the day she began to speak, L produced remarkably accurate sentences. As the portions of transcript

reproduced in Table Two show, she made no gross syntactic errors such as mistakes in word order. Although there was an isolated instance of a double marker (the negative she used in response to Question #5 in both September and January) and an error in pronoun selection (you for he) in the answer to Question #20 in November, L's syntactic errors consisted principally of missing grammatical morphemes. These included the plural ending, the third person singular ending, the article, the modal will, and the auxiliary be. In all cases, however, there was evidence that L was well on her way to acquiring the correct use of these morphemes. The plural, for example, was deleted from house and nose in September but correctly supplied for bird (#1) and one (#11), and shoe (#13). This pattern of production suggests that this particular error was not, in fact, syntactic but phonological; since both house and nose end with fricatives (as do all three variants of the plural morphemes), L may not have acquired that particular variant, the [-əz], or alternatively, she may have considered that one "hissing sound" at the end of the word was sufficient. Similarly, in September, L provided the other four morphemes as often as she deleted them in September.

One other aspect of L's syntax deserves comment, not because it was unique but because it demonstrates one of the primary characteristics of second language learning.

After failing to attach the plural ending to nose and to house in September, L supplied it in November. Yet the transcript shows that she alternated between correct and incorrect forms over the remaining months. Such behaviour makes it difficult to determine whether a particular morpheme has been acquired, but more importantly it demonstrates that instability is characteristic of the learner's developing rule system (or interlanguage as it is called in the literature on second language acquisition). Another example is provided by L's responses to Question #19. She produced the past tense form ate correctly in September and in March, but used eat in November, January and June. The correct form in September may have been an unanalyzed whole, i.e., a form she had learnt unaware that it was a past tense, but her wavering later between eat and ate suggests that her "rule" to use ate for the past tense was either imperfectly formed or was not operating in all obligatory instances. Again, this instability in the interlanguage is expected and in no way indicates that the child is not making progress. Rather, it is likely that the child's attention has simply turned to other areas of the language learning task and for a time she has put aside previously acquired rules in order to simplify the full rule system.

These informal comprehension and accuracy measures have served to highlight differences in the language-learning experience of the two children, M and L, but nowhere are these differences so evident as in the fluency which they showed in their answers to the 21 questions from the BSM.

Fluency. The smallest number of words L produced in response to the 21 questions was 63 in November, or six fewer than the 69 M produced at the end of the ten month period. L's average number of words per session was 85.6 compared to 50 for M. Within each session the average number of words per response ranged from a low of 3.0 to a high of 4.86 or, adjusted for single word responses (as described for M above), 3.56 to 5.56 compared to M's range of 1.56 to 4.0. The difference in fluency as indicated by this very rough measure is great, but it would likely have been greater had not the length of L's responses been constrained by the nature of the task. This measure of fluency is rough, however, and while it is justifiable in comparing the performance of a single child over time, it is not valid for detecting differences in fluency between children. Some children are simply more talkative than others. Moreover, in using the BSM to elicit data, it is unfair to consider M less fluent simply because he answered the questions without the (unnecessary) elaboration that L added. Nevertheless, any measure would show L to be more fluent than M. She was a talker who commented on everything around her and

dominated nearly every play or instructional activity in which she participated. A portion of a transcript of a session in early March further illustrates L's willingness to express herself on whatever topic was at hand. On this occasion, L was looking at a picture-only version of The Three Bears:

Teacher: Will you tell me what you see?

L: Yeah. There's Goldilocks playing with her toys. There's a big bed for papa bear, a middle size bed for mommy bear, and a weeny, weeny, tiny bed for baby bear.

T: Good. And what is Goldilocks doing?

L: Get in baby's bed. Trying them. Sleep. Now they're trying their porridge. Papa say in his loud voice "Somebody's eatin' my porridge." Mom's on the other side going "Somebody was eatin' my porridge." Pretty soon there's a tiny voice crying "Somebody's eaten my porridge and it's all gone." So Papa say in big voice "Somebody sleep in my bed." Mommy say in middle size voice "Somebody's sleep my bed." Baby bear, his tiny voice, "Somebody's sleep in my bed and here she is." She open her eyes and shouted "Who?". Then she ran home. The end. Do you want me sing a song?

In L's rendering of the story can be found the same fluency demonstrated in the more constrained BSM task. Her story shows that her syntax was frequently flawed - she left out many of the same morphemes she left out in the other task. But at the same time, once she got involved in telling her story, she told it coherently, using adverbs such as pretty soon, so, and then, to maintain continuity, and she needed only two prompting questions at the beginning. In contrast, M's telling of the same story required continual prompting:

T: Will you tell me a story, M?
What do you see?
M: The girl leaving in -
T: What is the girl doing?
M: Leaving in bear bed.
T: What's she doing now?
M: Lookin' kitchen.
T: And what's she doing here?
M: Her (unintelligible) chair.
T: What did she do to the chair?
M: Wreck chair.
T: Right! Now what's she doing?
M: Sleepin' in the bed now.
T: Yes?
M: That's the end.
T: (Laughing) NO, not yet. What are these?
M: Those are bear.

T: What are they doing?

M: Them, them, this...the girl eat them.

T: What's this bear doing?

M: Him (unintelligible)

T: What?

M: That girl eat again.

T: What's happening here?

M: That bear - her sleeping on her bed.

T: And now what's the girl doing?

M: (unintelligible) out window.

T: Yes. And what are the bears doing?

M: Lookin' out.

T: Is that the end?

M: Yeah.

M was prepared to end the story much earlier and even with continual prompting had a great deal of difficulty in telling the story, and this was a story which he liked and had heard many times. Clearly there were substantial differences in the level of fluency displayed by the two children in March. The question which arises now is why L was so superior to M.

While not carried out with scientific rigour, the comparison of the language learning experiences of these two children allows me to make certain observations about second language acquisition in children of this age, observations which may provide some insights into the process of second language

acquisition. L and M happen to embody certain factors associated with highly successful and less successful second language learners respectively. These factors include the home environment, and particularly first language attainment, the school setting, and certain personality factors. In the next section of this paper I will describe the differences between the two children relative to these four factors and in light of research evidence on their contribution to successful second language acquisition.

Home Environment and First Language Experience

Until fairly recently it would have been assumed that M's limited proficiency in Italian would have facilitated his acquisition of English. It was generally believed that the greatest obstacle to success in acquiring a second language was interference from the first language. We now understand that interference is only one source of difficulty in acquiring a second language. Moreover, the positive aspects of transfer from the native language likely balance or outweigh the negative effects. It is generally held that the learner benefits from any prior language learning experience. In fact, one of the central findings which has emerged from the vast literature on French immersion in Canada has been that the best predictor of success in the second langauge is fluency in the first. Just as early success in literacy is partly determined by the child's

prior experience in the home with books and reading, so it seems that success in acquiring a second language is partly dependent upon the child's having engaged in a wide variety of first language experiences. If those experiences extend beyond talk to books and reading, then the child is even more likely to succeed in the task of acquiring a new language.

L, by all reports, was a fluent and eager speaker of her native language; certainly she showed no reticence when she began kindergarten. This experience of talk and the variety of functions which it served in L's life could only work to her advantage when she began to learn English. Also, according to reports from the ESL Consultant who visited L's home, her family were a family of readers. In Cummins' (1980) terms, L had both basic interpersonal communicative skills (or BICS) and cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP). Both types of proficiency are necessary for school success particularly when the language of instruction is not the child's native language.

According to the available evidence, M unfortunately, had neither kind of proficiency. Throughout the school year when his ESL teacher spoke to him in Italian, he indicated some comprehension, but he never spoke with her except to repeat words occasionally. As mentioned earlier, his parents

did not encourage him to speak in Italian. His mother knew only a few words of English and, although his father knew a little more, he was away from home working as a fisherman for most of each year. M, being so much younger than his only sibling, came to the kindergarten with very little language experience of any kind.

Although extreme, M's experience is not unique. Many teachers have found in recent years that some parents who are not themselves highly proficient in English see their lack of English as the main cause of their difficulty in adjusting to life in Canada. Determined that their children not experience the same problems, they mistakenly, but with good intentions, limit their children's experience in their native language without being able to provide another language in its place. In the best of such cases, the parents speak a pidginized English which becomes the children's first language (and thus a creole). When the children begin school, it is with a non-standard dialect of English, and so they are frequently placed in ESL classes, sometimes with very limited success. From their point of view, and their parents', English <u>is</u> their first language, and they respond differently to language activities. Because of their age, and prior experience with English, they resist any attempt by teachers to focus attention of the <u>form</u> of their language - pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar - and both the teachers

and the children can become frustrated. M, however, began his formal education without even a non-standard dialect of English and having had almost no experience with most of the functions of language. This lack of experience meant that M was essentially acquiring his first language, but he was doing so at a much older age than is normal and he was doing so within the environment of the kindergarten which, however supportive, and linguistically and environmentally rich, did not approximate the circumstances in which most children acquire their native tongues.

The School Setting

When L came to the kindergarten, she came with secure interpersonal communicative skills. Her task for the next few years would be to acquire a second language while also acquiring cognitive/academic proficiency, in English rather than in her native Portuguese. In these goals, she was similar to children in French immersion, the major difference being that her native language was not the majority language of the community. Along the way, she would likely acquire interpersonal communicative skills as well, but at the beginning, all the language functions related to interpersonal communication could be fulfilled by Portuguese, leaving her "free" to concentrate on acquiring her congitive/academic skills in English. Since the language of the home and the language of the school differ with regard to many functions even when a single language is involved, L's task was not greatly unlike that to of the majority of English-speaking children who enter school each year.

M, on the other hand, had neither type of proficiency, and the task he faced was formidable. He had to acquire a language, including both interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive/academic proficiency, and while school might be a good setting in which to learn the latter, even it depends in part on the child's having basic communciation skills. The question is, then, how suitable the school setting is for acquiring these basic interpersonal communciative skills.

In understanding the role which setting plays in second language acquisition, it is necessary to consider the distinction between a natural environment and a formal environment and the effects each has on the young child. A natural environment is any in which the focus of the language is on communication. A formal environment, on the other hand, is any in which the focus is on linguistic form. Most researchers now believe that students, particularly young children, learn best in the environment where the focus of attention is on communciation rather than on linguistic form. Obviously, in the kindergarten which M and L attended and in the 45-minute ESL class, the focus was not on form in the same sense that it would be in a core French class or a Spanish class taught in the traditional way. Nevertheless, the accent of the classes, particularly the ESL classes, which both children attended, was necessarily on vocabulary development, beginning with

naming of objects and of actions for which native-speaking children already had labels when they came to school. There are two points to be made here about the effects this setting had on the two children. The first is that M and L could be expected to respond differently because of the different language histories with which they began. L already had names for most of the objects and actions in Portuguese, so learning new names was for her a cognitive/academic undertaking while for M, who had no labels for most of the same objects and actions, the task was more foundational. More importantly, L knew a great deal about the purposes to which language is normally put and she was expanding her repertoire of purposes. In contrast, M had little experience of the purposes of language and was creating rather than expanding his inventory. In other words, although M's linguistic needs were greater than L's, he was less able to take advantage of the environment which was provided for meeting them.

There was one other aspect of the school setting which worked in L's favour and against M. Although both children had the same kindergarten teacher, the two children had different ESL teachers working with them in the 45 minute period set aside for special assistance. The teacher which L had was an experienced elementary teacher who had had some formal training for teaching ESL, but whose greatest strength, other than her experience, was a clear understanding

of how young children acquire language. She had two children of her own, and having observed the circumstances under which they learned language, and the purposes to which they put it, she applied that knowledge to her teaching to create an environment which was supportive, linguistically rich and challenging, but which concealed very effectively the major goal of language "instruction." She played games with the children, she sang songs with and to them, and created an environment in which the wish to communicate was so strong that the children's English language development seemed to "just happen."

M's teacher, on the other hand, was a first year teacher who had had no kindergarten experience as a student. She had had ESL experience at the junior secondary level in one of her practica, however, and was hired as an itinerant teacher to teach four or five 45 minute sessions each day with groups of children from the primary grades (K-3). Making the transition from junior secondary to kindergarten was undoubtedly difficult for her, and since she had not first hand knowledge of language acquisition in children, the environment which she provided was more formal than that provided by the other teacher. For most children, the environment was effective - they learned English, some of them nearly as well as L. But for M, whose need was so much greater, the relative formality of the classes may have made the acquisition task more difficult.

Personality Factors

In addition to first language attainment and environment, an individual's success in second language acquisition is also partly dependent on certain personality traits. The research which has been conducted indicates that some of the more important traits are self-confidence, empathy and the individual's analytic tendency. In comparing the two learners, L and M, self-confidence is the factor which seems to have contributed the most to the difference between them. L, as noted earlier, was a talker. She was the eldest of three children in a family which valued talk and literacy. From her first day in kindergarten, she showed no signs of shyness or reticence. She was eager to play with the other children and to participate fully in the class. M, on the other hand, had had little contact with children his own age, was 15 years younger than his only sibling, and came from a home which was loving but largely non-verbal. When he came to kindergarten, he did not join the other children at play for several weeks, and although he showed no fear of the teacher or of the school situation, he never initiated an activity either with his teacher or his classmates. Where L was an eager leader, M was a willing follower.

The correlation between self-confidence and success in language acquisition is probably the result of the greater opportunity which arises for the more confident learner.

In joining in play and other activities in the classroom, self-confident learners create for themselves a nearly optimal language learning environment. Moreover, in more formal settings, self-confident learners worry less about making mistakes, and making mistakes is a sine qua non for second language learning.

Conclusion

I began this article by arguing that the belief that children are superior second language learners is a dangerous myth. The stories of L and M have illustrated that some children are superior learners, but for others second language acquisition does not come easily. Children such as L would likely be successful in acquiring a second language under almost any normal circumstances of language use. It is the phrase normal circumstances of language use which is crucial to the argument. For M, with his sparse linguistic history, the kindergarten was a less normal environment for language learning than it was for L with her much wider background of language use. Had the children been in a non-ESL grade one class instead of kindergarten, the task of literacy training would have made the circumstances even less normal for M.

The majority of ESL children entering school are neither as proficient at language learning as L nor as slow as M. They bring different abilities and different backgrounds to the task. These things we cannot control; what we can

control is the school environment. By making that environment one which is supportive and linguistically rich and which encourages the use of language which serves the functions of basic interpersonal communication, we can serve the needs of children such as L, who has basic skills in her native language but must build them in English, as well as the needs of children like M who is developing those skills for the first time.

The most important facet of the environment, however, is comprehensibility. Even the most stimulating mainstream classroom will not provide that environment if the children do not understand what is being said, i.e., if the emphasis is not so much on learning English but on learning new concepts on content.

For ESL children, the emphasis must be on both because otherwise they learn neither the language nor the content. Fortunately, as we have learnt from French immersion in Canada, this dual emphasis makes for good teaching. The extra effort required to make the language and the subject matter comprehensible - the repetition, the paraphrasing, the visuals, the previewing and reviewing - leads to better understanding of the subject matter for all children and to the acquisition of English by the ESL children. This is the way children "pick up" a second language.

The assumption that young children are so susceptible to a new language that they pick it up in the streets or

even in the schools could lead to dangerous educational practice. The lesson to be learnt from L and from M is that since there is such variation in children's abilities, we dare not leave second language acquisition to chance. Our job as educators, in other words, is to make the school environment as natural an environment as possible by making the language comprehensible and by encouraging the communicative uses of language before the more academic uses. We might do well to recall come of John Dewey's thoughts on the subject of children and language, written almost a century ago:

> Think of the absurdity of having to teach language as a thing by itself.... The child who has a variety of materials and facts wants to talk about them and his language becomes more refined and full, because it is controlled and informed by realities. (1900;55-56)

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TABLE ONE: DEVELOPMENT IN RESPONSES TO SELECTED QUESTIONS: M

Investigator	Child's Response			
	NOVEMBER	JANUARY	MARCH	JUNE
1. What are these?	no response	Bird /bɚ/	Bird /bɚd/	Birds /bɚdz/
2. What is the mommy bird going to do with the worm?	no response	Eat it.	She's give them food.	Give it to babies.
3. Why do they want food?	no response	[Question not asked because of inappropriate response above]	Because them hungry	Because they're hungry.
4. Why's he so fat?	He eat too much	Eat.	Because him eating too much.	Because him eat too lots.
5. And why's he so skinny?	no response	Cause he eat too lots.	Because he was eating.	Because he's not eating.
6. What are these two things?	House /haʊ/	House /haʊ/	House /haʊs/	Fat house and skinny house.
7. And these?	unintelligible	Nose /nos/	Nose /nos/	Nose /nos/
8. Why do you think this man lives in this house?	Cause.	(after much prodding) Cause him live there.	Because him house is fat.	Because him fat.
9. What's he doing to the floor?	no response	Cleaning up water.	Washing.	Washing.
10. Why's he doing that?	Cause.	Cause	Because him stink.	Because looking dirty.
11. (Looking at picture of "sleeping" fish.) Why are their eyes closed?	Want to go.	Cause them want to.	Because them not open them.	Them sleeping. Because them go bed - in a bed.
12. Why are their their eyes open?	Cause they like open.	Cause then they can't - they going.	Because not closing (/gojIn/) them.	Because they're not, they're not bed. They're not going sleep.
13. What did he do with his shoes?	Take them off.	Take them off.	no response	Doesn't have no shoes on.
14. Whose mop is this?	Hims /hɪmz/	Hims.	Him.	Hims.
15. What's this girl doing?	Dancing	Dancing	Dancing (/naensIŋ/)	Dancing
16. Why do you think she's happy?	Cause.	Cause.	no response	Her like it outside.
17. Whose flower is that?	Hers.	Hers.	Hers.	Hers.
18. Why is the dog looking at the king?	Doggy's looking (pause) that turkey.	Cause he eat, him eat.	Because him hungry.	Because him hungry.
19. What happened to the king's food?	All gone.	Dog eat it.	Dog.	The dog ate it.
20. What would have happened to the food if the dog hadn't eaten it?	Throw up.	Man come in the house and him eat it.	The apple fall (/ɔ/) down.	Him do this.
21. What happened to the apple?	Off.	Fell off.	Ap...goin' fall.	It fall.
TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS	28	52	51	69

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TABLE TWO: DEVELOPMENT IN RESPONSES TO SELECTED QUESTIONS: L

Investigator	CHILD'S RESPONSE				
	mid-September	November	January	March	June
1. What are these?	Little birds.	Birds [bɜ̃ds]	Small birds.	Those are birds.	Birds.
2. What is the mommy bird going to do with the worm?	Eat him.	Give it to the birds.	Give them to the little small birds.	Give it to the birds to eat.	
3. Why?	They're hungry.	'Cause they're hungry and crying for it.	'Cause they're hungry.	'Cause they're hungry.	'Cause they're hungry.
4. Why's he so fat?	He eats too much.	He eat too much.	He eats too much.	He eats too much.	'Cause he eats too much.
5. And why's he so skinny?	'Cause he doesn't eat nothing.	He eat nothing.	He doesn't eat nothing.	'Cause he eats nothing.	'Cause he eat a little bit.
6. What are these two things?	House	Houses [hɑ̃ʊsɪz]	In Portuguese? Casas. [And in English] Houses	Houses	House
7. And these?	Nose	Noses [nozəz]	Nose [nos]	Nose	Nose
8. Why do you think this man lives in this house?	'Cause it's fat.	'Cause that house fat.	'Cause that house so fat.	'Cause it's fat.	'Cause they're both fat.
9. What's he doing to the floor?	Wipin' it.	Wipin' it 'cause it's all wet.	He wiping his boat.	Washing it.	Wiping it.
10. Why's he doing that?	'Cause it dirty?	[not asked because answer is given above]	'Cause he's - there's a hole in the boat.	The boat's got a in it and he drowned it.	'Cause it's wet.
11. (Looking at picture of "sleeping" fish) Why are their eyes closed?	'Cause those ones are sleeping. These ones are not. And there's some water and they try to wet the water off.	'Cause they're swimming.	'Cause they don't like their eyes wet.	'Cause he like - 'Cause he like to swim with the eyes closed.	'Cause he like their eyes closed.
12. Why are their eyes open?	'Cause they're — swim.	'Cause they love it.	'Cause they like like their eyes wet.	'Cause they wanna do jump splash.	'Cause they like their eyes open.
13. What did he do with his shoes?	He wet his shoes.	He wet them.	It was all wet. He put them to dry.	He put them to dry. They wet.	[question not asked]
14. Whose mop is this?	His.	His.	His.	It's his.	His.
15. What's this girl doing?	She - um - dancing.	She's dancing.	Doing a Hawaii dance.	She's dancing Hawaii.	Dancing Hawaii.
16. Why do you think she's happy?	She like to dance.	She loves Hawaii.	'Cause she won the [unintelligible]	'Cause she likes dancing Hawaii.	She likes to dance Hawaii.
17. Whose flower is that?	Hers.	Hers.	Hers. 'Cause she won.	It's hers.	Hers.
18. Why is the dog looking at the King?	'Cause dog's hungry.	'Cause he's hungry.	He's hungry.	He is hungry.	'Cause the dog's hungry.
19. What happened to the King's food?	He - dog ate it.	He - the dog eat it.	Dog's - he eat it.	The dog ate it.	The dog eat it all up.
20. What would have happened to the food if the dog hadn't eaten it?	He - um - he die.	Then you'll die.	He would bite - he will eat the hat. Eat the apple I mean.	He'll die.	He'll die.
21. What happened to the apple?	The dog dropped it.	The dog dropped it.	Fell 'cause the dog pushed it.	It fell 'cause the doggie pushed it down.	Fell. He saw the food all gone. He saw the food all gone and he let the - fall - the apple fall.
TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS	75	63	102	94	94